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Getting our message across: Strategic reflections on modernizing statistical communication

Building a good reputation and avoiding pitfalls: Communications strategies for official statistics in the United States

Note by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics

Summary

While the United States has a decentralized statistical system, with many agencies mostly scattered throughout cabinet-level departments, there are both individual and joint efforts across the system to communicate the quality of US statistics to a wide range of stakeholders, including data providers and data users.

US statistical agencies are taking a number of actions to get the word out and build (and build upon) a good reputation and increase trust, and actions that can be taken to address issues as they arise.

The US Bureau of Labor Statistics recently adopted a crisis communications strategy to ensure that the necessary tools are in place to address unforeseen issues. With social media and the immediacy of the news cycle today, statistical agencies need to be prepared to respond to high-profile issues quickly.

The document is presented to the Conference of European Statisticians' seminar on "Getting our message across: Strategic reflections on modernizing statistical communication", Session 2: "Communication crises - issue and reputation management" for discussion.

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I. Introduction

1. While the United States has a decentralized statistical system, with many agencies mostly scattered throughout cabinet-level departments, there are both individual and joint efforts across the system to communicate the quality of US statistics to a wide range of stakeholders, including data providers and data users. From the first Census in 1790 to the establishment of federal statistical agencies in the 19th and 20th centuries, then to the incorporation of big data and artificial intelligence in the 21st century, the importance of delivering the right message about the care taken to produce high quality data has always been strong, and is perhaps at its strongest today. Trust in many institutions is low, frequent cybersecurity incidents make individuals and businesses wary about providing information, and competing sources of information – sometimes of questionable quality – are just some of the challenges facing statistical agencies. To address these challenges, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) and its sister statistical agencies have introduced new communications channels to get the message out to wider and more diverse audiences and are exploring radical changes to the way that information is disseminated in the future.

2. At the same time, statistical agencies have to avoid pitfalls that can harm their reputation, and have to be prepared to address issues that may arise. The BLS recently adopted a crisis communications strategy to ensure that the necessary tools are in place to address unforeseen issues. In the past, an attack on the quality of statistics might appear in the newspaper. After several drafts and rounds of review, the statistical agency head might author a letter to the editor that was most likely too late and too watered down. With social media and the immediacy of the news cycle today, statistical agencies need to be prepared to respond to high-profile issues quickly. The BLS crisis communications strategy considers issues such as the early or late release of data, incidents involving staff, and questions about the quality of data coming from prominent individuals. As the situation warrants, an already identified crisis team would approve a standby statement that can quickly be released via Twitter. Such a statement might confirm an issue (such as a delayed release) or might simply acknowledge that something occurred (such as a criticism). Such statements might be followed up with more detail, should events warrant. The goal is not to have to start from scratch each time an issue arises.

3. This document consists of two broad sections: actions that US statistical agencies are taking to get the word out and build (and build upon) a good reputation and increase trust, and actions that can be taken to address issues as they arise. In the case of proactive actions to build a reputation, we will look at new approaches to data dissemination designed to reach a wide range of data users. In the case of largely reactive actions that address issues and help to avoid pitfalls, we will consider a few scenarios that might affect a statistical agency, discuss whether any response is warranted, and examine various options for response. To conclude, we will peer into the crystal ball to consider future reputation management efforts as well as future issues that may attempt to derail the statistical system.

II. Getting the word out

4. While the statistical system in the United States is decentralized, by law and by tradition the statistical agencies work together and follow the same guidelines. In 2017, the Chief Statistician of the United States led an effort among the principle statistical agencies to develop a vision and roadmap for US statistics in the 21st century and beyond. This effort consisted of several focus areas, including quality guidelines for the use of alternative data sources and expanded opportunities for qualified researchers to access microdata from multiple statistical programs. As a result of this effort, the importance of improving

communication about the value of Federal statistics was also recognized. To this end, U.S statistical agencies are focusing on two related themes: how to provide statistical information in more user-friendly ways and how to reach a broader audience with our information.

5. By design, the release of statistical information can be somewhat dull. The goal is to provide impartial information and let others put the spin and interpretation on it. But that effort to avoid being partisan might get in the way of introducing innovation. Take for example the case of the monthly release of the US Consumer Price Index (CPI), a product of the Bureau of Labor Statistics that has been around for over 100 years. It appears that the agency has not made many changes to this news release for most of those 100 years. Sure, information is now available on the internet and available at lightning speed, but the release of 2018 looks an awful lot like the release of 1953. The typeface has changed and a chart has been added, but that is not a lot of progress for 65 years.

Figure 1

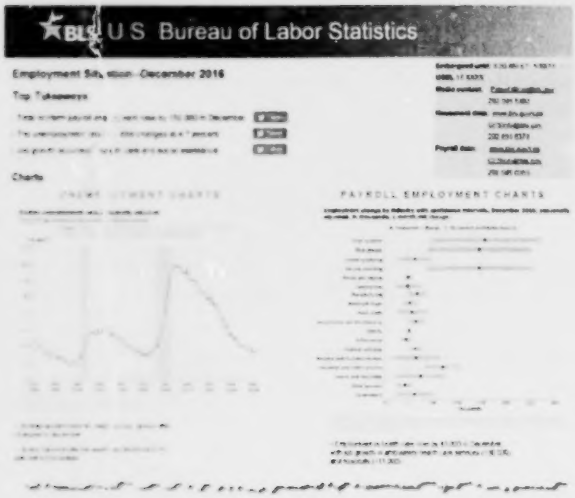
Comparative of monthly releases of the US Consumer Price Index (CPI)

1953 release

2018 release

6. There are efforts underway at BLS to redesign news releases. Known as "next generation" news releases, they are designed as a web product, complete with mouse-over definitions, direct links to data series, and "tweet-able" statements. In addition, the agency is experimenting with machine-learning techniques that would have the computer identify and write the key highlights from the data. In the spirit of remaining impartial and consistent, computers may do a better job of avoiding bias in the text than do human beings.

Figure 2
"Next generation" news releases



7. This is just one example of the efforts that US statistical agencies are making to reach a wider audience. Recently, the agencies also took stock of the various dissemination tools and formats being used, and are making efforts to share best practices and pitfalls. A couple of themes developed, such as vehicles to provide daily tidbits of information, often with a graphic focus, and efforts to tell stories using the data.

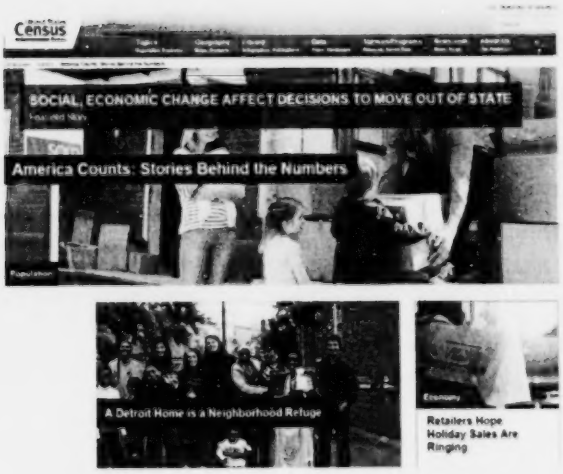
8. Under the heading of daily information, the Energy Information Administration issues *Today in Energy* and BLS issues *The Economics Daily*. These and similar products from other agencies provide a user-friendly graphic highlight of current data, typically released in the past few days. Under the heading of story-telling, the Census Bureau recently added a feature to its website called *America Counts: Stories Behind the Numbers*. These feature articles are designed for non-technical readers, and put context to the data. For example, early in 2018, one of the Stories Behind the Numbers looked at the number of Olympic athletes by state. Other agencies have similar products, such as *Beyond the Numbers* from BLS. And under the heading of cute names, the Bureau of Economic Analysis unleashed the *BEA-R Facts* – BEA Regional fact sheets, which are graphics heavy.

9. All of these products are available on the statistical agencies websites, which are the primary means of disseminating information. Millions of visitors each month access the multi-millions of data elements on these sites. In addition, the statistical agencies use a variety of social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and blogs. Videos are also becoming more prominent, focusing on the mission and output of the agencies, methodologies, data uses, and much more.

10. The agencies have also considered how to evaluate these various new products. Are they meeting customers' needs? Are they finding new audiences? Information from web site analytics, social media coverage and comments, likes and dislikes, and other metrics are used to make sure the time, energy, and funds going into these new products are well spent.

Figure 3
Examples of daily information and storytelling

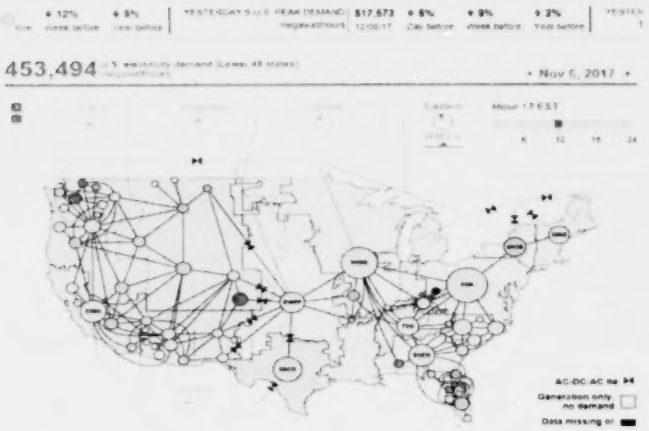
eia
TODAY IN ENERGY
TED: The Economics Daily
Employment increased in 318 of 346 largest counties for year ending June 2017


Census
SOCIAL, ECONOMIC CHANGE AFFECT DECISIONS TO MOVE OUT OF STATE
America Counts: Stories Behind the Numbers
A Detroit Home is a Neighborhood Refuge
Retailers Hope Holiday Sales Are Ringing

11. Having taken stock of what agencies are doing, the action is now turning to sharing information across statistical agencies. Plans are in the works to bring together the creative minds behind many of the new and different dissemination products to share their secrets, their successes, and their challenges with all statistical agencies.

12. What have we learned already? Statistical information doesn't have to be dull, and doesn't have to be simply a view of past history. Efforts are underway to provide nearly real-time information. The US Energy Information Administration's website now includes the US Electric System Operating Data tool, which provides hourly electricity operating data. This is not data from last year or last month or last week. This is data from the previous hour. By tapping into various administrative, social network, and video information, more and more of the statistics of the future may provide real time information.

Figure 4
US Electric System Operating Data tool



III. Reacting to challenges

13. However, all these innovative data products and dissemination platforms are of little use if the public doesn't trust the statistical information being provided. Emergencies or controversies can arise without warning and may be unavoidable. But a little planning may help to ease the communications efforts surrounding these events.

14. The US statistical agencies follow statistical policy directives established by the Office of Management and Budget, which provide a certain amount of independence from changes in policy and politics. This has served the US system well, and the public can rely on the data being accurate, timely, and objective year after year, regardless of political changes. But the statistical policy directives do not completely isolate the statistical agencies from potential crises, such as those resulting from an emergency or a controversy. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics has been proactive in developing a Crisis Communications Plan, the purpose of which is to be ready to address crises before they occur.

15. BLS defines a crisis as a significant event that prompts substantial, often sustained, news coverage and public scrutiny and has the potential to damage the organization's reputation and image. A crisis could be precipitated by an emergency or a controversy.

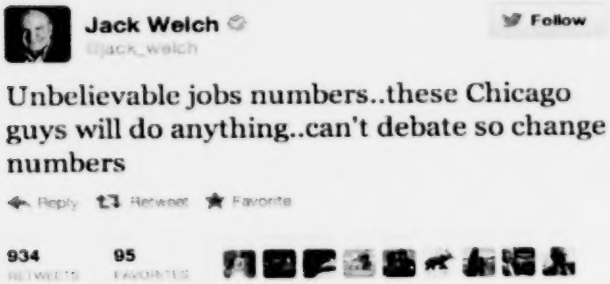
(a) An emergency is a fire, hurricane, crime or other event that presents a threat and typically involves a response from police, fire or emergency medical personnel. Such an event has the potential to disrupt the production and timely release of statistics.

(b) A controversy more directly involves the data the agency produces, such as a premature or delayed release of data or questions of data veracity from prominent figures. Such events have the potential to tarnish the reputation of the statistical agency.

16. There are typically standard operating procedures in place to handle emergencies, such as building evacuation procedures and back-up facilities to recover lost electronic data. But the fallout from a potential disruption of production is difficult to anticipate. For example, as Super Storm Sandy approached the east coast of the United States in late October 2012, it was anticipated that government agencies might be closed due to the weather emergency. BLS was contacted by several media outlets to inquire if the storm would disrupt the release of employment data on November 2nd, a few days before the presidential election. While contingency plans are in place for such events, such as having staff complete activities from home while teleworking, at that time no crisis communication plan was in place. Reporters were told that the agency would do everything it could to release data on time (which it did).

17. Controversies may be more difficult to address by standard procedures. This is especially true when the controversy is generated externally, such as when a prominent figure makes a comment questioning statistical data. For example, the former CEO of General Electric tweeted the following soon after BLS released employment data in October 2012, a month before the US presidential election. "Chicago guys" refers to supporters of President Obama, who was running for re-election.

Figure 5
Tweet by former CEO of General Electric



18. With no crisis communications plan in place, BLS had no prepared response. Media questions were answered by describing the process by which the data were produced, and by indicating that the process had not changed.

19. The BLS crisis communications plan we have in place now is designed to prepare the agency to address issues such as these when the need arises. The guiding principles for communicating about a crisis are to communicate facts as quickly as possible, update information regularly as circumstances change, and ensure the safety of the BLS community and the continued operation of essential services to stakeholders. Statements will be accurate and focus on what is known, without speculation. Communication will involve multiple media to reach as many people as possible with accurate, timely information. This is especially important in the first minutes, hours, and days of a crisis.

The goal is to be transparent, accountable, and accessible to all stakeholders, while also being mindful of legal and privacy concerns.

20. The plan identifies various roles, including a Crisis Communications Team that determines and enacts the communications tactics best suited to the crisis situation. This involves gathering and assessing facts, determining if a public response is needed, coordinating with other agencies as needed, responding honestly, and identifying any corrective actions. In developing the plan, BLS leadership worked through 6 possible scenarios, which covered a wide range of possible crises:

- Early release of embargoed data by BLS;
- Possible delay of news release (due to weather, building issues, data issues, IT failure, website down);
- Employee incident (high profile arrest, social media blunder);
- High profile building or security incident (unrelated to data release, such as flood, power outage, fire);
- Potential early release of embargoed data by public official;
- Prominent figure attacks the integrity of BLS and/or the need/accuracy of our data on a highly visible platform.

21. Under the plan, any potential crisis should be brought to the attention of the Crisis Communications Team as soon as possible. Events are then examined to determine if they warrant crisis communications activities. Based on the definition, if media are involved the situation is probably a crisis. If the agency reputation could be hurt, it is probably a crisis. An event may not meet these two criteria at the beginning but could grow into something bigger and become a crisis. All such situations are monitored closely by the Crisis Communications Team.

22. Situations that meet the definition of a crisis warrant action. To prepare to act, BLS identified a number of *standby statements* that could easily be applied to various situations and could be released within minutes of a crisis situation. For example:

- The Bureau of Labor Statistics is aware of reports of a potential early release of the **(date and name)** news release. More information is forthcoming.
- The Bureau of Labor Statistics is reviewing the **(event)** and more information is forthcoming;
- Because this is an **(emergency agency, e.g., fire)** matter, **(name/title)** of the **(emergency agency)** will be handling further inquiries about this case.
- We are aware of recent public reports questioning certain Bureau of Labor Statistics data. Everyone at BLS works diligently to ensure that the data from **(the BLS or name of program)** is the gold standard. Our data are reliable and our methods are transparent.

23. Depending upon circumstances, more statements may be issued as information becomes available. For example, if there were a building problem, the following statement might be issued:

- Because of an (event, e.g., electrical blackout, burst water main, weather emergency, discovery of a suspicious package, etc.) the Bureau of Labor Statistics' headquarters building was shut down at (time and date). We are working with (organizations) to resolve the problem. The unscheduled closure is not expected to affect the release of the (date and name) news release scheduled for release on (time and date).

24. Unfortunately, BLS has had occasion to use this Crisis Communications Plan, and it has proven effective. Incidents involving employees, as well as potential weather disruptions, have garnered media attention and required a reaction. In many cases, the statements developed are used with little change. They may be used to respond to media inquiries, either by telephone or email, or they may be issued as a public statement on the internet or via social media. In all cases, use of the Crisis Communications Plan is followed by a post-crisis evaluation. Here, all those involved address what was successful, what needed improvement, what changes are needed to the plan, and what would be done differently in the future.

IV. Looking forward

25. Today, information is available literally at your fingertips and instantaneously. The US statistical agencies are not always on the cutting edge of data dissemination techniques, but continue to make strides. The real-time data from the Energy Information Administration is a good example of how agencies might use administrative data sources, such as banking or retail scanners or traffic cameras, to produce the next generation of statistics. There are many issues to address when considering this next generation of statistics, not the least of which is data quality and reliability. Consideration must also be given to new technologies that will replace our cell phones and social media accounts in the coming decades. The US statistical agencies will continue to explore ways to make use of these new technologies while continuing to produce accurate, timely, and impartial information to help Americans make good decisions.

26. And crises will continue. They may be different crises, perhaps stemming from new technology. And while the media may change, there will always be a need to communicate. Development of the BLS Crisis Communications Plan provided the leadership of the agency an opportunity to think in advance about certain emergency situations and how they should be handled. No doubt the prepared statements will change over time, and experience from each event will help to improve those statements. Having those proactive conversations and preparing those statements in advance has served the agency well in times of crisis, and will be an essential element in the toolbox of the US statistical system as it continues to evolve to meet the needs of the 21st century and beyond.